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A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE IN DORIS LESSING’S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*: THE VOICE OF SILENCE

Abstract: *My paper explores the formal elements within Doris Lessing’s The Grass Is Singing (1950), emphasizing its connection to the concept of the dramatic monologue commonly associated with poets like Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Despite the traditional separation between prose and poetry, my analysis posits that the dramatic monologue, originally tied to poetry, exhibited resilience and adaptability. This adaptability is showcased in the way the dramatic monologue extended its influence beyond poetry, finding a home in emerging literary forms like the short story, a genre that began developing in the United Kingdom around the end of Browning’s life. My examination underscores the enduring and versatile impact of the dramatic monologue as a narrative tool, showcasing its ability to transcend specific literary genres and traditions.*

Keywords: *Doris Lessing; Robert Browning; T. S. Eliot; Dramatic Monologue; Literary Forms; Complex Psychological Themes; Social Commentary; Narrative Techniques; Empathy; Truth and Perspectives; Literary Exploration; Characterization; Multifaceted Truth; Versatility of Literary Forms.*

Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*¹, first published in 1950, is known for its exploration of race relations and its critique of colonialism in Africa. The novel tells the story of a white farmer’s wife, Mary Turner, and her tragic fate in the context of racial tensions and the oppressive social environment. My paper explores the formal elements in *The Grass Is Singing*, drawing a connection to the concept of the dramatic monologue often linked with poets like Robert Browning and Tennyson. Despite the distinction in literary forms between prose and poetry, the present analysis suggests that the dramatic monologue, as a form, demonstrated durability and adaptability. This literary form, originally associated with poetry, extended beyond poetry, finding expression in emerging literary forms such as the short story, which began to develop in the United Kingdom towards the end of Browning’s life. This exploration underscores the versatility

¹ Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, London-Ibadan-Nairobi, Heinemann, 1981. All quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

and lasting influence of the dramatic monologue as a narrative tool across different genres and literary traditions.

The discussion about the boundaries of lyric, drama, and fiction, as put forth by Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric*², provides a theoretical framework for understanding how Lessing's work fits within the broader spectrum of literary genres. In alignment with T. S. Eliot's pursuit of objectivity, which involved avoiding the use of the first person and favoring the dramatic monologue, Doris Lessing similarly abandons any expressive form where the 'I' (the speaker) could be identified with, or at the very least, associated with the novelist. This approach signifies a deliberate separation between the narrative voice and the authorial presence, allowing for a more detached and objective exploration of characters and themes within the literary work. By employing the dramatic monologue and avoiding direct personal identification in the narrative, Lessing, like T. S. Eliot, creates a space for a more nuanced and independent exploration of characters and their experiences.

By examining the ways in which Lessing reinterprets the Victorian and Modernist literary traditions, the paper suggests that her contemporary reimagining of these influences facilitates new perspectives on contemporary art.

Although both Browning and Lessing operated in different literary forms and genres, they were notable for their exploration of complex psychological and social themes within their respective works. Dramatic monologues allow readers to enter the minds of various characters and to see an event from that character's perspective. Understanding the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of a character not only gives readers a sense of sympathy for the characters but also helps readers understand the multiplicity of perspectives that make up the truth. In effect, Browning's work, as well as Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, remind readers that the nature of truth or reality fluctuates, depending on one's perspective or view of the situation. Multiple perspectives illustrate the idea that no one sensibility or perspective sees the whole story and no two people see the same events in the same way. Browning further illustrated this idea by writing poems that work together as companion pieces, such as *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1855) and *Andrea del Sarto* (1855). Poems such as these show how people with different characters respond differently to similar situations, as well as depict how a time, place, and scenario can cause people with similar personalities to develop or change quite dramatically.

The dramatic monologue verse form allowed Browning and Lessing to explore and probe the minds of specific characters in specific places struggling with specific sets of circumstances. In *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869), and in *The Grass Is Singing* Browning and Lessing, respectively, tell a suspenseful

² Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) & London, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 258.

story of murder using multiple voices, which give multiple perspectives and multiple versions of the same story. Although Lessing introduces the themes of apartheid and colonialism with a deliberately unique vision, the novel gives chances to each character to express openly their story, showing the situations in which silences are their finest choices. The colonist and the colonized exchange silences and storytelling in their communications. Both sometimes find difficulties in articulating their thoughts, and some other times they find it suitable to explain their viewpoints and narrate their counter stories. The counter stories are typically used by the oppressed to defend their stance, whereas majoritarian storytelling is employed by the powerful group for proving their dominance.

The central character in Lessing's narrative is Mary Turner, whose murder is unveiled and resolved in the opening chapter. This resolution involves a swift trial of the 'native' Moses, who, as per the newspaper account that initiates the book, is presumed to have been "in search of valuables". The murder is conspicuously avoided in discussion, and Moses is never identified in the account. No effort is made to delve into his psychology, which remains cryptic throughout the narrative³. Everything is quickly and neatly closed, and everyone silenced – except for the unidentified, omniscient narrator who, acting as spokesperson for a collectivity, explores Mary's life and tracks her psychological deterioration. The 'artificial' and 'affected' language of majoritarian storytelling is designed simultaneously to reveal the tragedy of existence, and to allow us to perceive it only indirectly. When the narrator questions the significance of a newspaper report within the context of the deteriorating state of 1950s Rhodesia, he is approaching, without knowing it, what John Ruskin said in 1857 in *The Elements of Drawing*: "it is the vainest of affectations to try to put beauty into shadows, while all the real things that cast them are left in deformity and pain"⁴. John Ruskin's perspective goes into the challenge of portraying beauty in the presence of surrounding deformity and suffering. Additionally, the passage hints at George Eliot's notion of art's

³ See Margaret Moan Rowe, *Doris Lessing*, London, Macmillan, 1994, pp. 15–17: "No attempt is made to explain Moses's psychology. He is a type, the ever-threatening and beckoning black man who comes to dominate even Mary's dreams [...] Lessing presents him as a sexual energy rather than as a person" and Katherine Fishburn, "The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*", *Research in African Literatures*, Bloomington, 25, 4 (Winter 1994), p. 4: "Lessing's text makes no real effort to understand Moses [...] Like the bush he is impenetrable, inexplicable, and dangerous [...] Moses is [...] an archetypal ("Hegelian") African". In a 1984 interview she released to Eve Bertelsen, Lessing states: "[I]t was a pity I ever wrote Moses like that, because he was less a person than a symbol [...] But now I've changed my mind again. I think it was the right way to write Moses, because if I'd made him too individual it would've unbalanced the book. I think it was right to make him a bit unknown" (E. Bertelsen, "The Persistent Personal Voice: Lessing on Rhodesia and Marxism", Interview, *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, 9, 2, 1985, 18).

⁴ John Ruskin, Prefatory Remarks to the Catalogue of the Educational Series
<http://ruskin.ashmolean.org/collection/8990/9165/9209>

purpose not to merely replicate reality but to translate it into the language of art, thereby evoking emotions akin to those prompted by the original subject⁵.

The suggestion seems to be that our awareness of the language of art serves as a means of creating a necessary emotional distance, which, in turn, enables us to maintain a certain level of protective ignorance or innocence. This idea implies that comprehending art involves both an engagement with reality and a purposeful disconnection from it, allowing for the preservation of a mental barrier that shields us from harsh or overwhelming truths.

From an early twentieth-century perspective, Lessing may be viewed as one who prepared the way for contemporary practitioners of the novelist's art by her unusual blend of social realism and experimentation, offering a unique blend of both approaches. In a manner akin to other female authors focusing on issues of gender and cultural conflicts, Lessing draws a comparison between the marginalized status of South Rhodesian black natives and that of women.

By delving into the intricacies of human relationships and their impact on the underprivileged, Lessing manages to delve into the inner psychology of her characters, even though they might be constrained by societal silencing. The narrator is depicted as engaging in a detective-like pursuit, attempting to unravel the intricacies of the murder of Mary Turner, ultimately aiming to unearth a truth that might be only indirectly attainable but nonetheless remains unheard at the textual level. The persistent noise of cicadas and other insects serves as a stark contrast to the characters' silence, emphasizing a profound disconnect between humanity and the divine. This separation underscores a deep existential divide, reflecting the overarching theme of alienation and disconnection.

Additionally, the text highlights an irreparable divide between racial groups, particularly between the black and white populations, within the novel's setting. This divide is portrayed as a pervasive and negative force that contributes to the overall sense of societal deterioration and disharmony. The reference to T. S. Eliot's poem „The Waste Land“ (1922) in the title of Lessing's novel further reinforces the sense of impending doom and societal disintegration. By invoking T. S. Eliot's poem, the title *The Grass Is Singing* alludes to themes of decay, desolation, and the breakdown of Western civilization, thereby setting a tone of foreboding and apocalyptic despair.

From this interpretative perspective, it is not inaccurate to define the novel's setting as a place inundated with irrationality and confusion, inhabited by demons triumphantly witnessing the scattering, exploitation, and materialistic degradation

⁵ George Eliot's elaborated Ruskin's notion that art is a language in her 1854 review on Ruskin's *Edinburgh Lectures on Architecture and Painting*. Eliot wrote in her *Notebooks* that the aim of art is “to produce in the mind analogous emotions to those produced by the object itself”, not “by transcribing, but by translating it into the language of Art”. John Clark Pratt; Victor Neufeld A. (Editors), *George Eliot's Middlemarch. Notebooks: A Transcription*, Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1979, p. 140.

of natural resources. Such an atmosphere, overshadowed by an “eclipse of the messianic”⁶, serves to represent Lessing’s fierce condemnation of the decay of art and culture at the turn of the century. In a society constrained by such taboos and veiled with such prejudices, one might wonder, whether as a reader living in a vastly different context or as someone residing within the same society, how can a clear moral perspective be attained? Furthermore, how can this be achieved in a work of fiction, as opposed to an overtly polemical or didactic piece of writing?

Lessing’s response lies in an understated yet unmistakable sense of irony that not only informs us about the mechanisms of racism but also conveys the cognitive dissonance, the psychological strain that propels such a system of oppression. This approach not only sheds light on the mechanisms of racism, but also underscores the psychological burdens that sustain such oppressive structures. While the novel possesses a satirical quality, it also beckons readers to delve deeper into its narrative, encouraging them to perceive layers of meaning beyond the initial apparent observations. Lessing’s work is depicted as a demonstration of a multifaceted approach to storytelling, evident on various levels, including style, meaning, and structure, thus exemplifying a remarkably flexible method of composition. Like T. S. Eliot, Lessing strives for objectivity and distances herself from an expressive form where the speaker (‘I’) can be identified with or associated with the novelist. This approach aligns with a preference for the dramatic monologue, a form that allows for the creation of distinct voices and characters separate from the author, reinforcing the idea that the speaker within the work is not a direct representation of the novelist’s personal perspective or experiences.

Notwithstanding this, behind the mask of silent Mary Turner, Lessing does perhaps reveal more of her feelings, more of the truth, particularly her feelings of despair, than she consciously intended. This seems to invite a psychological explanation for Lessing’s use of the form. However, no attempt to answer here in terms of Lessing’s psychology; instead, attempt to describe the form, and to suggest that when we see what it can do, how the possibilities it brings are so rich and so rewarding, we have the answer to the question why Lessing should have adopted it. With few exceptions, discussions of the Modern period of Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Joyce are based on T. S. Eliot’s formulation of the ‘mythical method’. The Moderns faced a world devoid of order; fearing entropy, they intuited, primarily through the potentialities of metaphor and myth, an order behind, within, or above the chaos of modern experience. Yeats’ gyres, T. S. Eliot’s Classicism, Joyce’s system of allusion and cyclical history are descriptions of this order released through assuming masks, *personae*, or other modes of impersonality.

⁶ George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 9.

1. Objectivity

The term ‘objectivity’ emerged in journalism after the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1920s. This development was driven by a growing acknowledgment that journalists were frequently biased, sometimes unknowingly so. Objectivity needed the adoption of a balanced method of testing information, a crystal-clear approach to evidence where the truth would naturally reveal itself. In essence, the statement overlooks the importance of not only reporting facts accurately but also ensuring the reliability of how journalists interpret and analyze information. It discourages a more comprehensive and critical approach to journalistic practices beyond the realm of factual reporting. A key distinction within journalism points out that while the field has evolved numerous techniques and conventions for establishing facts, there has been comparatively less emphasis on developing a systematic approach for assessing the reliability of journalistic interpretation. Newspaper reports do not represent or reflect external events or ideas, as they are not real propositions, but verbal formulas that mimic real propositions. This realization emphasizes the fact that the entirety of any newspaper report – what we accept as the reality of its world – is a groundless and insubstantial imitation of life that its author imposes on their readers, drawing them into collusion. By framing an illusion within a reality that is itself an illusion, it blurs the border between the imaginary and the real within the narrative world and between the world of the report and the real world in which we are observing or reading it. This suspends us between engagement in the dramatic fiction and vigilant distrust of the virtual reality it creates.

It would not seem coincidental that *The Grass Is Singing* opens with a clipping from a daily newspaper article summarising the murder, on the the basis of generic and unsubstantiated hypotheses:

MURDER MYSTERY
By Special Correspondent

Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front veranda of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime. No motive has been discovered. It is thought he was in search of valuables.

THE newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder, or rape, that is the feeling white people have.

The short newspaper report suggests the murder of Mary Turner under the headline nominalization “Murder Mistry”, even though we are informed that the suspect “has confessed to the crime”. The attention-grabbing words of the headline play on the potential for ambiguity that can exist in the relationship between word and meaning. This is, as obvious, a linguistic method to attract the reader’s interest, as well as the selection of loaded words that carry particularly strong connotation, i.e. carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning⁷.

This headline content, despite its relative importance (its visual impact and position in the paper are limited), gives the reader the overall picture of the current news. However, in its attempt to entice the reader into a story, it is confusing. The reader is left floundering as the meaning remains almost irretrievably ambiguous even after reading the accompanying article. The article opening *The Grass Is Singing* is evidently a current cliché, as stereotyped as the suppositions used to reconstruct the murder. Alternatively, such a ‘documentary’ technique can be interpreted, in Bakhtin’s terms, as an example of the permeation of fictional boundaries by the cultural system within which a text is produced. Lessing’s adoption of the linguistic repertoire of newspapers, in the opening section of *The Grass Is Singing*, offers either a possible multiplication of voices to the public, provoking discussions, or a reduction to a single point of view. For most South Rhodesian readers of the newspaper, as Lessing’s narrator tells us, their racial prejudices swiftly fill in this gap with preconceived notions concerning Moses, a black man, and his relationship to Mary, a white woman. In contrast to this, another group, the neighbors of the Turners, have had the opportunity to observe something that complicates this story. When the Sergeant questions Marston (the young Englishman seeking fortune in Rhodesia) about the murder and any suspicious things he may have seen, Marston senses that he is being mocked and excluded from certain knowledge. In his discomfort and frustration, he refrains from expressing what is on his mind: that the murder investigation should not be concluded as simply as Slatter and Denham consider it, as Mary Turner must have been more involved than they are willing to admit.

Consequently, *The Grass Is Singing* presents itself as a narrative form that essentially relies on verbal fabrication, not devoid of interpretative prejudices. As the first sentence of the narration (“The newspaper did not say much”) foreshadows, the “truer” story lies beneath these seemingly easily interpretable facts. This incongruity between external reality and the truth can be generated, as Steiner states, by the fact that “[a]rt may be an incapacity to see the world as it is, an evasion sometimes pathological, sometimes merely a child of the “reality principle” (so Freud)”⁸. Lessing’s view is in fact part of a subtle argument to the effect that an attempt to transcribe feeling too directly into art might be the means

⁷ Maria Grazia Busà, *Introducing the Language of the News*, (“The Power of Words”, pp. 129–142), London and New York, Routledge, 2013.

⁸ Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 23.

to pervert it. By the same token, Oscar Wilde remarks that “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth”⁹. On these terms, Wilde might even be seen as a last-ditch defender of sincerity. But a generation later, T. S. Eliot’s critical essays took Wilde’s argument a stage further, to assert the irrelevance of the author’s personality to the work itself: “the progress of the artist”, he wrote, “is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”¹⁰. Much later criticism followed T. S. Eliot, and the principles of structuralism and post-structuralism leave no room for sincerity as a criterion for poetry and more generally for art. Yet the issue is not quite dead. Recent critics have typically been inclined to insist that we should attend only to ‘the words on the page’, and have rejected biographical speculation as irrelevant, or misleading. One reason sincerity has not figured much in recent critical discussion is that it has been assumed, not unreasonably, to represent merely a special case of intention. The test of a work of art’s sincerity is that the emotion it communicates corresponds to that experienced by its author, and it would be absurd to refer that correspondence to anything other than intention. Accordingly, any discussion of an author’s sincerity stands condemned as an example of the ‘Intentional Fallacy’. In its most basic form, this celebrated argument posits two main points: firstly, that it is impossible to know an author’s intentions, and secondly, even if these intentions were known, they would be inconsequential in the interpretation of a work of art. The rationale behind the second point is meticulously comprehensive, stating that either the author’s intentions are clearly manifested within the work of art, eliminating the need to seek external evidence; or they are not realized, in which case referring to the author’s statements about their intentions becomes a mere distraction.

The extremest example of a writer disclaiming any special insight into his own text, on the grounds that his intentions are irrelevant, may be T. S. Eliot’s view that the poem’s meaning is “what [it] means to different sensitive readers”, with T. S. Eliot’s own reading simply one among others. T. S. Eliot insists that “the reader’s interpretation may differ from the author’s and be equally valid – It may even be better”¹¹. In the special case of sincerity, we would argue that Lessing’s technique in *The Grass Is Singing* narrative leads to one essential and defining characteristic of the dramatic monologue as Browning used it: that the narrator is not the author of the novel, nor yet in any obvious way the mouthpiece of him. It underscores the idea that the narrator of the novel is distinct from the author and is not explicitly a mouthpiece for the author’s voice or opinions. Similarly,

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Critic As Artist* [first published in *Intentions*, 1891] in *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 185.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in *Selected Essays* [1932], London, Faber and Faber, 1951, pp. 13–22, p. 17.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Music of Poetry’ (1942), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode, London: Faber, 1975, pp. 107–114 (p. 112).

Browning himself emphasized that his poems were expressions of various imaginary characters, highlighting the separation between the poet and the speaker within the poem.

Lessing's novel delves deeply into the history of a single human soul, focusing primarily on the experiences and development of the central character Mary Turner. This approach aligns with Browning's own emphasis on exploring the development of individual souls within his dramatic monologues, highlighting the significance of character exploration and psychological depth in both authors' works. While there may be instances where the speaker's views align with the author's, the central idea remains that the poems or narratives are primarily concerned with the characterization and development of a distinct individual, separate from the author's own perspective and voice.

2. The voice of silence

Lessing's immediate concern in *The Grass Is Singing* is to elaborate a mercilessly desecrating message towards imperialist capitalism and the ideals of prevarication by the white colonizers. Since newspaper language is characterized by an abundance of stereotypes, it cannot be overlooked that the *incipit* of *The Grass Is Singing*, adopting a generally conformist and superficial linguistic code, indicates that the underlying paradigm of the narration is that of the mystification of reality, which corresponds to the fragmented vision of the main character Mary. Mary is attributed the surname Turner, as well as a social identity, only after her somewhat forced decision to get married:

She had the undistinguished, dead-level appearance of South African white democracy. Her voice was one of thousands: flattened, a little sing-song, clipped. Anyone could have worn her clothes [...] She could have become a person on her own account. But this was against her nature (Lessing, 1981, p. 43).

The presence of lexemes and phrases such as “undistinguished”, “one of thousands”, “flattened”, “Anyone could have worn her clothes”, “She could have become a person” denotes Mary as an ontologically and physically undifferentiated entity and implies the possible interchangeability of the character in a society where everything is commodifiable, while the adjective “dead-level” carries a negative value that foreshadows the end of story.

To understand Mary's behaviour we may recall Lacan's definition of hysteria as *le vide absolu*. Curiously in *The Grass Is Singing* ‘le vide absolu’ is not exclusive to Mary. Emptiness and self-denial are also attributes of natives, who are at the opposite extreme of Englishmen on both the social ladder and the chain of power. In sum, then, language in *The Grass Is Singing* is Englishmen's private domain, while women and natives must conform themselves to the sounds of silence. In a world where changes are slow to take place, both minorities talk without

speaking, they are seen but not heard. Mary is unable to reproduce and articulate any kind of language: “[For her] to make a sentence was an overwhelming effort” (Lessing, 1981, p. 173). Mary’s loss of verbal communication is progressive. The first statement she utters is a joke based on the judgment of others, having herself no knowledge of men: “Men they get all the fun!” (Lessing, 1981, p. 45); she proceeds with a minute series of mostly negligible and increasingly disconnected observations, ending up by becoming a stranger to herself:

She was speaking in a new voice for her, a voice she had never used in her life. It was taken direct from her mother, when she had those scenes over money with her father. It was not the voice of Mary, the individual [...] but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that (Lessing, 1981, p. 9).

And again: “She heard a strange angry muttering, and realized she was talking to herself, out aloud, as she walked” (Lessing, 1981, p. 177); “She was shocked when she heard her own voice, for she had not known she was going to speak [...] She had lost her balance; she had no control over her actions” (Lessing, 1981, p. 178); “She would begin a sentence and forget to finish it [...] She would say three words, and then [...] lapse into silence” (Lessing, 1981, pp. 183–184). The incoherent sounds that Mary produces originate from the primary and pre-symbolic modality referred to by Julia Kristeva as the semiotic, which is linked to the feminine *chora*. Being pre-symbolic, Mary’s language lacks morphological units. This is why when “[once she was roused by a noise, and realized it was herself, talking out loud in the living room in a low angry voice [...] [the sound of [her] soft, disjointed crazy voice was as terrifying as the sight of herself in the mirror” (Lessing, 1981, p. 184)¹². The primary impulses characteristic of the semiotic also encompass nonverbal features that foreshadow the irreversible process of the disintegration of Mary’s personality. While the physical degradation remains a component of Lessing’s fictional depiction of Mary Turner, Lessing’s exploration of gender suggests that woman is more of a cultural product than a biological essence. Mary’s linguistic impotence signifies the potential dominance of cultural stereotypes over a thinking individual¹³.

¹² With regard to the difficult canonization of *GS*, it is interesting to report what Virginia Tiger writes in “‘Taking Hands and Dancing in (Dis)unity’: Story to Storied in Doris Lessing’s ‘To Room Nineteen’ and ‘A Room’” (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 36 no. 3, Autumn 1990, p. 428), regarding the recurrence of the mirror image along Lessing’s macro-text: “As the example of Jane Eyre in the red room instructs, women and mirrors are intimately linked. In Lessing the motif of the mirrored mad double registers (and dislodges) competing modes of consciousness as well as competing codes of narration. To shatter the glass is to set free the mirror’s enclosed prisoner and the realist text’s supervised captive: the mystery below fact’s surface”.

¹³ It would be tempting to say that Mary’s story is modulated on the myth of Cassandra, interpreted by Steiner in the following terms: “The motif of the woman or maiden who says very little, in whom silence is a symbolic counterpart to chasteness and sacrificial grace, lends to a unique pathos

Lessing's conception of silence delves into a complex preoccupation, mirroring the core of T. S. Eliot's approach to writing ethics. It highlights the poet's grappling with the inevitable limitations of his own poetic tools, prompting contemplation on the ultimate efficacy of poetic discourse. The issue of silence arises from the necessity to preserve writing, an art that is fading in troubled times, and it represents a compromise stemming from the potential impotence of the poetic witness that the artist strives to resist in their own manner. Mary's inability or reluctance to articulate herself verbally thus signifies her discontent and mistrust of an imposed symbolic order, whose rigid structures fail to articulate her experiences. Silence, while serving as Mary's existential paradigm, gradually evolves into a metaphor for repression, ignorance, and isolation, reflecting a social pathology that appears to emerge from a dormant state whenever someone interacts with Mary or attempts to express something concerning her. Certainly, in the novel, we come across instances where the news of Mary's murder is met with what is described as „tacit agreement“ (Lessing, 1981, p. 10) within the small settlement community of whites. Mary's husband, Dick, a solitary and reticent man, finds pleasure in the fact that the presence of his wife does not disrupt the prevailing silence in the household during mealtimes. Additionally, Tony Marston perceives Mary as a “strange, silent, dried-out woman” (Lessing, 1981, p. 227), giving the impression that she has perhaps forgotten how to speak. These instances serve to underline the theme of silence as a pervasive element, both within the community's response to significant events and in the personal interactions within the characters' lives.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, reality is not readily decipherable using the logical and symbolic coordinates deeply rooted in Mary Turner's intellectual code, which is ingrained in European culture. In such a context, Mary's position is marginal in both English and African cultural systems. She is white in a black continent and a woman in an essentially patriarchal world. It is worth noting that Mary, as a free woman, represents a deviation from the social norm, and her subsequent status as a married woman does not reconcile with her own nature. Consequently, it is not surprising that Lessing chooses to depict her heroine as almost mute, reflecting her liminal condition. Still Mary strives to experiment with new and unusual language expressions or face the risk of non-existence. Mary's search for a role and identity within the African context, along with an alternative linguistic code to break free from the condition of exile and the pervasive influence of conformist thought, is a crucial aspect of her character development. This desire

to the Antigone of Oedipus at Colonus or Euripides' Alceste. A male god has cruelly possessed Cassandra and the speech that pours out of her is his; she seems almost remote from it broken” (G. Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 44). In the context of this correspondence between verbal language and physiology, where Mary Turner's verbal thrift *speaks* to her helplessness and sexual inactivity, the unequivocal sign of a violence she suffered but remained silent in text, would be inferred from the sudden emission of words not belonging to her.

is exemplified in her efforts to communicate with the indigenous people, as depicted in the scene where she sits on her bed with a handbook on kitchen written in Kaffir, emphasizing her earnest attempt to learn the language. However, her grasp of the Kaffir language does not necessarily facilitate effective communication, as illustrated by the reaction of the black workers when she instructs them to resume hard work in the fields. They listen to her with what she perceives as “cheeky” expressions, displaying sullenness and anger, seemingly paying little attention to her words, and simply waiting for her to conclude (Lessing, 1981, p. 72). These interactions serve to underscore the complexities and challenges inherent in cross-cultural communication and highlight the difficulties Mary faces in establishing meaningful connections within the African community,

In the context of the novel, it becomes evident that each ethnic group has its own system of judgment, which serves as the basis for establishing deviations in behavior. Mary’s ‘otherness’ is perceived by the natives as something alien, marking her as a malign and fearsome presence from which they feel the need to distance themselves, even at the level of semantic systems. English, meanwhile, is not solely the language of the white colonizers but also operates within the various levels of the social hierarchy. This perspective is illustrated through Mary’s metalinguistic considerations regarding the pronunciation and idiom used by her interlocutor Moses. Her impatience with Moses speaking in English stems from her inability to comprehend what he is saying in his dialect¹⁴.

When Mary attempts to engage with the linguistic world of the black community, she encounters a barrier to understanding. Consequently, the Kaffir language is portrayed as an external layer, as “blank” as Moses’ gaze (Lessing, 1981, p. 145), shielding an invulnerable and mysterious background. In her exploration of the link between power and language proficiency, Lessing also highlights the connection between passivity and linguistic inadequacy, or between passivity and a complete denial of language:

This man was shrugging and smiling and turning his eyes up to heaven as if protesting that she had forbidden him to speak his own language, and then hers - so what was he to speak? That lazy insolence stung her into an inarticulate rage. She opened her mouth to storm at him but remained speechless [...] Involuntarily she lifted her whip and brought it down across his face in a vicious swinging blow (Lessing, 1981, p. 146).

On the other hand, Lessing highlights the connection between linguistic proficiency and control, which can be seen as a key theme in *The Grass Is Singing*. If we consider George Steiner’s assertion that power dynamics undermine the conditions of communication, turning language exchange into a form of con-

¹⁴ “Don’t talk that gibberish to me”, Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, quoted, p. 146.

frontation¹⁵, it becomes clear that maintaining power over the native population demands a certain level of insight and wisdom. In the novel, Mary lacks the ability to interpret Moses' language, and this deficiency in understanding contributes to her lack of control. Consequently, she contemplates using a whip, which serves as a symbol of the white colonizers' coercive methods used to subjugate the indigenous people. Mary's growing concern stems from her perception that the natives are becoming increasingly audacious, as evidenced by the statement: "The phrase was in the air [...] The natives were getting cheeky" (Lessing, 1981, p. 42). Additionally, the narrative highlights the idea that the native workers, previously exploited for their labor, are gradually becoming aware of alternative ways of living beyond merely producing wealth for others, as stated in the passage, "They, the geese that laid the golden eggs [...] did not know there were other ways of living besides producing gold for others. They know better now, or are beginning to" (Lessing, 1981, p. 15).

Language, in this context, becomes associated with the tools of warfare, which are linked to virility, exemplified in the character of Charlie Slatter, a rapacious businessman who keeps a *sjambok* as a symbol of his readiness to resort to violence, if necessary, as depicted by the motto, "You shall not mind killing if it is necessary" (Lessing, 1981, p. 15). This connection between language, power, and violence underscores the complex dynamics at play within the colonial setting portrayed in the novel.

We may conclude by asserting that an in-depth examination of various themes and literary devices, such as language use and character depiction in *The Grass Is Singing*, sheds light on the implications of Mary Turner's linguistic struggles and her interactions with the indigenous population. This analysis highlights the power dynamics and racial prejudices at play, showcasing Lessing's engagement with complex psychological and social themes in her work.

Lessing's adept use of the dramatic monologue is presented as a powerful narrative tool, enabling a profound exploration of characters' inner lives. This technique offers readers a close and intimate connection to the characters' thoughts, emotions, and motivations. By delving into themes of hierarchy, violence, and the intricate interplay between human nature and societal structures, *The Grass Is Singing* presents a searing critique of colonialism and its enduring legacy. The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of addressing systemic injustices and societal shortcomings, particularly in the face of contemporary challenges related to the environment, healthcare, and politics. In this way, the profound exploration of human complexity and societal dynamics in the novel continues to resonate with readers, offering valuable insights into the complexities of the human condition.

¹⁵ See Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, p. 34: "Where there is no true kinship of interests, where power relations determine the conditions of meeting, linguistic exchange becomes a duel".

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Мирјам Сете

ДРАМСКИ МОНОЛОГ У ДЕЛУ ДОРИС ЛЕСИНГ,
THE GRASS IS SINGING (ТРАВА ПЕВА): ГЛАС ТИШИНЕ
(Резиме)

У мом раду се нуди свеобухватно истраживање формалних елемената у делу Дорис Лесинг, *The Grass Is Singing (Трава пева, 1950)*, наглашавајући његову повезаност са концептом драмског монолога који се обично везује за песнике као што су Роберт Браунинг и Алфред лорд Тенисон. Упркос традиционалној подели на прозу и поезију, моја анализа поставља тезу да је драмски монолог, првобитно везан за поезију, показао отпорност и прилагодљивост. Ова прилагодљивост је приказана у начину на који је драмски монолог проширио свој утицај изван поезије, проналазећи одговарајући терен у новим књижевним облицима попут кратке приче, жанра који је почео да се развија у Уједињеном Краљевству крајем Браунинговог живота. Моје истраживање наглашава трајни и свестрани утицај драмског монолога као наративног средства, показујући његову способност да превазиђе специфичне књижевне жанрове и традиције.

Кључне речи: Дорис Лесинг; Роберт Браунинг; Т. С. Елиот; драмски монолог; књижевни облици; комплексне психолошке теме; друштвени коментар; наративне технике; емпатија; истина и перспективе; књижевно истраживање; карактеризација; вишезначне истине; свестраност књижевних облика.

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